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INFO DATE:
10-Mar-2016**Eugenio VIDES CASANOVA** (b)(1)
(Phonetic: VEE-dace cah-sah-NO-vah) (b)(3) NatSecAct**EL SALVADOR****Minister of Defense** (b)(1)
(b)(3) NatSecAct**Addressed as:**
General Vides Casanova

Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova holds one of the most powerful posts in El Salvador. He and his colleagues in the Salvadoran Military High Command serve as watchdogs over the activities of the civilian politicians and government administrators. [redacted] no major policy decision can be made by those civilians without the approval of the High Command. [redacted] Vides Casanova will play a key role in holding together the fragile political-military coalition that governs the country, at least over the short term. He publicly supports the government's agrarian reform efforts, the democratization process, and the investigation of human rights abuses. (C)

Before his appointment as Defense Minister, Vides Casanova had served as commander of the National Guard since October 1979, when a military-dominated coup overthrew President Carlos Humberto Romero. A group of moderate-conservative officers, in alliance with reformist civilians, has dominated policymaking since then and has instituted broad social, political, and economic reforms in El Salvador. Vides Casanova is the only remaining member of the government who was a major participant in that coup. His predecessor as Defense Minister, Gen. José Guillermo García, also took part in the coup and subsequently, after assuming the Defense portfolio, made himself the most powerful figure in the country and the strongman in the government. (S/NF)(1) (b)(1)

Vides Casanova, the Man (b)(3) NatSecAct (b)(3) NatSecAct

[redacted] has wide support in the armed forces. Vides Casanova was a prominent actor in a January 1983 crisis that occurred when Lt. Col. Sigifredo Ochoa, military commander in Cabañas Department, refused to obey García's orders [redacted]

In addition, [redacted] some Salvadoran Government and military officials question Vides Casanova's ability to lead his country during a prolonged [redacted]

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war. [redacted]

[redacted] Except for a few early career assignments, he has not had any experience in leading troops in the field. [redacted]

[redacted] Vides Casanova may not become the strongman in the government that García was. (C/NF)(1) (b)(1)

The Military Problems . . .

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Vides Casanova's job as Defense Minister will be difficult, mainly because he will have to regain command control over a highly politicized officer corps, members of which often seem to do things their own way and ignore the directions of their superiors. In addition, we believe that he must address the following specific issues that have caused many in the military to question the authority of their superiors in San Salvador, especially that of former Defense Minister García:

- Many officers [redacted] García and his colleagues in the High Command mishandled the war and were out of touch with the reality of the military situation in the country. They have said that senior military officers have encouraged a garrison mentality among field commanders and have relied too much on large-scale operations instead of more effective small search and destroy missions.

- The officers have publicly criticized García for alleged corruption and a high degree of involvement in politics. They have also charged that he abused his powers and refused to replace incompetent cronies while dismissing capable leaders for disagreeing with his policies.

- [redacted] many senior Salvadoran military officials have criticized García because he was reluctant to visit troops in the field and did little to stop the practice of field commanders spending long weekends in San Salvador away from their troops. (S/NF)(1) (b)(1)

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... And Vides Casanova's Solutions

Vides Casanova faces considerable difficulties in dealing effectively with those criticisms [redacted] most Salvadoran officers view him as a leader who has progressed through the ranks because of ability and not cronyism. [redacted]

[redacted] Moreover, we believe that he may break with some past military policies that have been associated with García/ [redacted]

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We believe that Vides Casanova, in his early days on the job, will have to make himself more visible to the troops fighting the war if he hopes to eliminate their perception of an isolated military leadership operating in ignorance of actual conditions in the field. He may encounter some problems gaining credibility with the troops, however/ [redacted]

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Stemming the discontent of military subordinates will, in our estimation, tax all the political and personal skills that Vides Casanova possesses.

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The Political Problem

Vides Casanova is faced not only with institutional dissatisfaction in the military but also with the overall struggle for political dominance that has been taking place in El Salvador since the elections of March 1982. Because the military strongly supports the government, its activities are inextricably linked with Salvadoran political developments. As a result, the armed forces have been the target of much criticism from the extreme rightist National Republican Alliance (ARENA), which has claimed that the military intervened to "steal" the election from them. One of Vides Casanova's most difficult problems will probably be to find an acceptable balance between his roles as military leader and political leader. [redacted] he said that the Army was distracted from focusing totally on the war effort because:

- Too much of its time was devoted to guaranteeing the continued existence of the government and to overseeing the agrarian reform program.
- Pressure was being brought to bear on the Army to respect human rights and eliminate abuses of authority on the one hand and to fight an unconventional war on the other. (C)

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Complicating Vides Casanova's job is El Salvador's political scene, which consists of a moderate center under attack from extreme elements on the left and right.

[redacted] moderate politicians in the government will try to convince Vides Casanova to support plans to broaden the political constituency before the election scheduled for December 1983. Those plans, the officials say, include bringing more moderate elements of the extreme left into the legitimate political process. (C) (b)(1)

The Communist Threat

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Vides Casanova publicly attributes his country's instability to both internal and external factors.

The general [redacted] that the insurgency in El Salvador would end if the Soviets, Cubans, and Nicaraguans discontinued their support for the guerrillas. [redacted] he views Nicaragua, which functions as a supply base for the well-equipped Salvadoran insurgents, as a threat to regional stability.

Attitude Toward the United States

A friend of the United States, Vides Casanova welcomes this country's support for his government. [redacted] Like Garcia, he [redacted] takes into consideration US concerns about Salvadoran events.

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Vides Casanova has nonetheless suggested [redacted] that US pressure to democratize his country has been both a blessing and a curse. [redacted] the March 1982 elections—which were supported by this country—brought the extreme right into the government and weakened the center. He has maintained that the military would not have allowed such a situation to occur. Like many of his colleagues, Vides Casanova has complained [redacted] about what he considers to be an insufficient amount of US military aid to El Salvador. He has said that US military training programs are invaluable to the troops. Vides Casanova [redacted] is aware that in the United States congressional agreement is essential before some aspects of US policy can be enacted, and he has expressed concern about the possibility of a future cutoff of US aid. Familiar with US politics and history, he has used his knowledge of the history of social injustice in the United States to defend his country's human rights record. (C)

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National Guard Chief (b)(3) NatSecAct (b)(3) NatSecAct (b)(3) NatSecAct

As commander of the National Guard, Vides Casanova [redacted] intended to upgrade its image from that of a security organization unconcerned about human rights. He may be vulnerable to criticism, however, for his role in the investigation of charges against guardsmen who were involved in the murder of four US churchwomen in December 1980. A few guardsmen have suggested, [redacted] that Vides Casanova may have tried to cover up the role of his men in the murders. There is no evidence available to indicate that he or any other high-ranking National Guard officer had any involvement in the murders, however. Although not connected personally with the murders, Vides Casanova may have inadvertently contributed to a feeling at the time that anyone opposed to the military's program for the country was fair game for elimination. A month before the murders of the churchwomen, the general, in an address to a group of military officers, accused Salvadoran Christian leaders of "wrapping themselves in religious habits in order to promote subversion." This statement, coupled with the November 1980 murder by extreme leftist assassins of a high-ranking Salvadoran military officer, may have led some guardsmen to believe that such retaliation was acceptable. (C/NF)

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A Spectrum of Support (b)(3) NatSecAct (b)(3) NatSecAct (b)(3) NatSecAct

[redacted] Vides Casanova has a base of support among the more liberal military men, who view him as an honest leader who wants to see in-depth and fundamental change in El Salvador. [redacted] he was once the choice of extreme right military and civilian officials to head a one-man military government in place of the various juntas that governed El Salvador from October 1979 until the elections of March 1982. The general refused to participate in their machinations, however, [redacted]. Rejected in their overtures, the extreme right came to associate him more closely with the policies of García and at times included Vides Casanova among the senior officers whom they wanted to see removed from office. [redacted] During the Ochoa crisis, however, [redacted] leaders of the reactionary ARENA, who were aware that he appeared the most viable compromise candidate for Defense Minister, suggested that he replace García. [redacted] Vides Casanova does not trust ARENA and looks on its maneuverings as an attempt to remove the moderates from the military's senior ranks. (C/NF)

Although Vides Casanova has friends in the centrist Christian Democratic Party (PDC) and cooperates with them, [redacted] the general had little love for the PDC and its political program. Nonetheless, then-President José Napoléon Duarte of the PDC personally selected Vides Casanova as the senior military official to accompany his delegation during a public relations tour of the United States in September 1981. [redacted]

[redacted] During that trip Vides Casanova was observed [redacted] being

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quite friendly with other Christian Democrats in the delegation, especially Julio Adolfo Rey Prendes, the PDC's current secretary general/

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Education and Career

Vides Casanova was born on 3 December 1938 in Santa Ana Department in western El Salvador. A 1957 graduate of the Salvadoran Military Academy, he ranked second in his class. He attended the Superior War School in Peru from October 1969 until January 1971; [redacted] it was during that period that he developed his view that the military should play a reformist role in the government. (C)

Vides Casanova has spent many years as an instructor and administrator in Salvadoran military schools. He has served as director of the National Communication Agency (1973-75) and as director of the Industrial Development Institute (1975-77). In 1977 he visited Cuba to attend a meeting of the Group of Latin American and Caribbean Sugar Exporting Countries. [redacted] he counts that trip as a formative highlight in his career—perhaps because it gave him a negative picture of socialist societies. From 1977 until the 1979 coup, he was commander of the Salvadoran Military Education Center. (C)

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Personal Data

Vides Casanova is a practicing Roman Catholic, and [redacted] He speaks some English, although he used an interpreter during his visit to the United States in 1981. (C/NF)

The general has been married twice. After his first wife died of cancer in 1973, he remained a widower for about six years [redacted]

He has two daughters and a son by that marriage. His second wife, the former Maria Lourdes Llach, is about 16 years his junior and is from a wealthy coffee-growing family/

The couple has a son and a daughter. (C/NF)

Members of Vides Casanova's family have been prominent in public life. His father was Governor of San Salvador Department in the mid-1970s. A brother, Mauricio, is a colonel in the military and is currently director of the Salvadoran Military Education Center. An uncle, Eduardo Casanova Sandoval, is Ambassador to Uruguay. (C)

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